

# Horticulture Column

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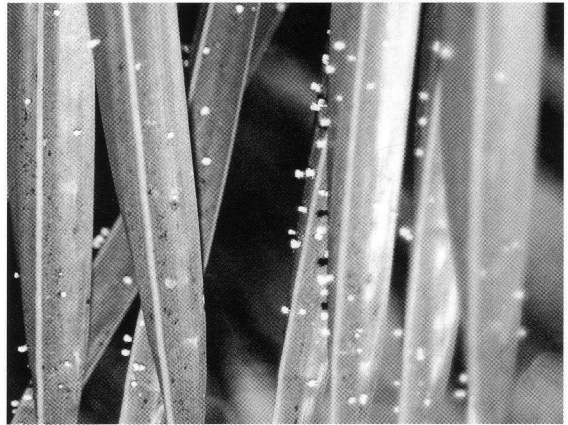
**Q.** I grew some date palms, *Phoenix dactylifera*, from the seeds of dates that I bought at the grocery store. They are two years old now, and I have recently planted three of them in my yard. There are four others still in pots that I am going to give away. The new leaves always look better than the older leaves, but the oldest leaves are not just discolored, they are covered with rough, tan colored specks, especially under the leaves. When I touch the spots, colored powder gets on my hand. Is it a disease or an insect? John LaRue, Texas.

**A.** You are probably describing a very common fungus disease of date palms called false smut, *Graphiola phoenicis* (Fig. 1), and the tan colored powder that you noticed on your hand is the spores of this fungus. There is a fairly long list of palms that are said to be hosts of this disease but I have seen it only on *Phoenix* species that are native to arid habitats, namely, *P. canariensis*, *P. dactylifera*, *P. sylvestris* and *P. theophrasti*. All of these seem fairly susceptible, and at least in central Florida, young plants almost invariably have false smut on their lower leaves.

Fortunately this disease does not usually have much effect on the growth of an otherwise healthy palm. Fungicides, copper hydroxide or mancozeb for instance, can be used to help control this disease but finding a product labelled for legal use on palms might not be possible. If one follows a few precautions this disease can be kept in check without spraying. Date palms and the other *Phoenix* spp listed above are all best grown in full sun, even as young seedlings. Irrigation water should be kept off the foliage as much as possible. Keeping the foliage dry is perhaps more important in the prevention of other leaf spot diseases that can occur along with false smut. If plants must be watered with overhead sprinklers, one should avoid doing so late in the day or at night so that the foliage will have time to dry before sunset. Finally, removing the affected leaves before they deposit spores on the newer leaves can help to control false smut, especially if done in the fall, say, November in Texas or May in the Southern

Hemisphere. It is important that you do not remove excessive numbers of leaves in an attempt to control this disease. The loss of green, functional leaves would be a cure that is worse than the disease. If more than a few leaves are infected with false smut, remove only the worst affected ones. I have observed that the ornamental species of *Phoenix* become less susceptible to false smut as they get larger, and I hope this will be the case with your date palms also.

1. The underside of a leaf of *Phoenix canariensis* infected with false smut, *Graphiola phoenicis*.



## Note:

This piece is Bernie Peterson's last contribution to the Horticulture Column. The editors are grateful to Bernie for his many fine articles in this space, and we thank him for his service to the journal.

From now on, all Horticulture Column questions should be sent to Katherine Maidman, Fairchild Tropical Garden, 10901 Old Cutler Road, Coral Gables (Miami), Florida 33156 USA. Readers' questions can also be submitted to Katherine via e-mail at <kmaidman@fairchildgarden.org>.

THE EDITORS